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ABSTRACT

A qualitative research approach was used to examine how one vocational education and training (VET) school in rural Australia contributed to its community and the complex role of leadership in the process. The study focused on the VET in Schools program in Cooktown in Far North Queensland. The following data collection activities were conducted: (1) semi-structured interviews with purposively selected students, school staff, parents and other community members, and representatives of industry and community groups; (2) researchers' observation; and (3) a review of written documentation. The initiative for the VET in Schools program came from two teachers at Cooktown State School who were concerned with the failure of the mainstream curriculum to cater to certain students. The program was developed through a school-community partnership that was formalized by formation of a management committee comprising representatives of all stakeholder groups in the community. The project has resulted in increased in student attendance and retention rates and has enabled students to identify their place in and value to the community. The program's success was attributed to a leadership process focusing on extensive consultation with stakeholders and a willingness to take risks by pushing traditional boundaries of government policy and practice. (Contains 25 references.) (MN)

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Thinking outside the box: a remote VET in Schools program challenges traditional boundaries

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What do a school and community do when mainstream education is failing its students and those students are not completing secondary schooling? In one remote[1] community, the solution was to form a partnership between the school, local community, and State and Commonwealth education authorities, and to plan and implement a VET in Schools program. This paper outlines reasons for the effectiveness of the program, including a leadership process which focuses on extensive consultation with stakeholders, and a willingness to take risks by pushing traditional boundaries of Government policy and practice.

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This paper presents findings from one of five sites selected to participate in a national study into the contribution of rural schools to their communities, apart from their traditional role of educating youth. In this site the focus is on the process of developing and implementing a VET in Schools program, the program's outcomes, and the role of leadership as a key influencing factor. The study is timely as it overviews the multiple outcomes of VET in Schools programs from the perspective of school and community members, and it addresses the issue of leadership for effective school-community partnerships. Both are recommended areas for further VET research (Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia 2000; Dumbrell 2000).

Background to the study

Rural schools and social capital

Recent research highlights the role of rural schools in helping to build community capacity by developing community social capital (Lane and Dorfman 1997; Miller 1995). Social capital is defined as interactions between people which lead to the development of social networks 'that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions' (Putnam 1993, p 167). Research indicates that the nature of the social capital is determined by the quantity and quality of these interactions; in particular by the degree of elements we call internality-externality, historicity, trust, and shared values and norms (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000). As school and community interact, relationships are forged which contribute to the community's stores of social capital, and to community sustainability (Falk and Mulford, in press; Lane and Dorfman 1997).

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VET in Schools programs as facilitators of social capital

Recent studies identify a variety of outcomes of VET in Schools programs for individuals and communities. For example, student outcomes include improved self-esteem and self-confidence (Kane 1997, cited in Dumbrell 2000; Misko 1999); increased vocational, team working and communication skills; and greater chances of obtaining employment (Misko 1999). Kilpatrick et al's (2000) study of three Tasmanian rural schools identifies a number of initial outcomes of VET in Schools programs for schools and communities, including increased school retention rates, more positive attitudes towards education and learning within the community, and the provision of lifelong learning opportunities. In particular, evidence is emerging that as schools and their communities work together to develop VET in Schools programs, they are building new networks within the community (Figgis 1998; Kilpatrick et al 2000). These new networks are important in building community social capital (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000).

Leadership in schools and communities

Research identifies school and community leadership as a major factor influencing school contribution to rural communities (Johns et al 2000; Lane and Dorfman 1997). In particular, leadership has been found to influence the effectiveness of VET in Schools initiatives (Chiswell et al 2001; Frost 2000; Kilpatrick et al 2000).

In recent years there has been a shift in emphasis from hierarchical, leader-centred leadership to a new leadership paradigm, focusing on leadership as a process through which group goals are realised (Barker 1997; Leithwood and Duke 1999). This shift in leadership focus reflects a world of rapid change and increasing complexity in which a small number of designated leaders, it is argued, is no longer able to meet individual and group needs (Falk and Mulford, in press). Research indicates that the collective and facilitative practices associated with transformational leadership are most closely associated with effective school reform (see, for example, Mulford 1994; Silins and Murray-Harvey 1999). These practices include developing the vision and goals for the school, developing and maintaining a supportive school culture, and fostering capacity and commitment of staff (Duke and Leithwood 1994).

Recent research by Silins and Mulford (cited in Hallinger et al forthcoming) notes a positive relationship between the transformational leadership practices of school principals, the extent to which their school displayed organisational learning principles and positive student outcomes. Schools characterised as learning organisations displayed the following characteristics: a trusting and collaborative climate; a willingness to take initiatives and risks; a shared and monitored mission; and ongoing learning through professional development. By building trusting relationships and establishing inclusive structures for governance and processes for collaborative enquiry within their schools (Lambert 1998), transformational leaders encourage distribution of leadership responsibilities amongst teachers (Lambert 1998; Silins and Mulford cited in Hallinger et al forthcoming) and also amongst parents (Lambert 1998).

The community development literature also describes the emergence of a new leadership paradigm. The focus is on leadership as a social process made up of complex relationships, which allows for 'the development and definition of roles and role expectations where none may have existed, and they include ways that people

have an effect upon each other apart from our usual ideas about relationships' (Barker 1997, p 9). In support of this view of leadership, Falk and Mulford (in press) argue that a new community leadership model, which includes and values a wider group of people than just the 'leader', is a key to creating sustainable communities. Drawing on the research of Peirce and Johnson (1997), Falk and Mulford (in press) describe this new model as enabling leadership, which facilitates others to come together to create visions and plan futures, inspires commitment and action by enabling people to solve problems, and builds broad-based leadership involvement (Falk and Mulford forthcoming). In particular, the focus of the proposed new enabling leadership model is on the facilitation of networks across community sectors - that is, on the development of social capital (Falk and Mulford forthcoming).

Methodology

This qualitative research uses a case study approach to investigate the way in which one rural school contributes to its community, and the complex role of leadership in the process. The study is centred on Cooktown in Far North Queensland, which was selected purposefully for several reasons: evidence of effective leadership in the development and maintenance of a VET in Schools program; the relative remoteness of the location; and its Indigenous population (approximately one third of the population of the Cook Shire is classified as Indigenous according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998). Utilising a multi-method research design, data were collected using three techniques: semi-structured interviews; researcher observation; and reference to written documentation. Interviewees were selected using a purposive sampling strategy (Babbie 1998), to represent four target groups: (1) students, (2) school staff including the Principal, (3) parents and other community individuals, and (4) representatives of industry and community groups. With the aid of Non-numeric, Unstructured, Data Information Searching and Theorising (NUD*IST) computer software, interview data were analysed thematically with reference to the literature, and were validated through a process of triangulation involving researcher checks with selected interviewees, and cross reference to written documentation and researcher observation (Burns 1997).

The community and its school

With a population of 1411 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998) and growing, Cooktown is a service centre for the surrounding pastoral properties, and for a number of smaller Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. The region supports a number of industries, including rural industry, mining and tourism. The only secondary school in the region is Cooktown State School and Secondary Department, which caters for 420 students from pre-school to year 12. Approximately 25-30% of the total students are Indigenous, concentrated mainly in the Secondary Department.

In an effort to remedy low school retention rates, the school and community collaborated to develop a VET in Schools program, which was introduced in 1997. *Step ahead: a Cooktown community initiative* is for students designated 'at risk'. It is needs-driven and culturally inclusive, although of the 22 students enrolled in the program in 2000, the majority were Indigenous males. Work placements reflect the industry base of the region, and include rural skills, building and construction, engineering (pre-vocational), basic office skills and hospitality.

Findings

A community with a purpose

The initiative for a VET in Schools program came from two teachers at Cooktown State School concerned with the failure of the mainstream curriculum to cater for certain students. From the beginning, the school recognised the importance of developing the initiative as a partnership between school and community, if the problem was to be dealt with effectively.

A 'think tank' meeting was organised by the school to which prominent community members representing diverse industry and community groups in the region were invited. In a community used to helping itself, the level of community commitment and support for the program was high from the beginning:

> ... they jump on board and they feel well they have to because, you know, if they don't nobody else will. And they're very, the Cooktown people are extremely vigorous and passionate about their town, extremely so, and I've never seen anything like it.

To formalise the school-community partnership, a Management Committee was formed, comprising representatives of all stakeholder groups, including the school, local council, the construction, mining, pastoral and hospitality industries, Indigenous groups and parents. Committee members were described as 'a very very powerful group of quite energetic and creative people'. The formation of the Management Committee was significant because it facilitated 'on-going liaison between stakeholders and clients to obtain relevant feedback for guiding the development of the program' (*Step ahead: a Cooktown community initiative* booklet, p 12), and brought 'a sense of direction and a networking structure to the project' (*Step ahead: a Cooktown community initiative* booklet, p 10).

Committee members used their networks to canvas other employers within their respective industry groups to offer work placements to students. The care and time taken with the screening and selection of students and employers was described as a key feature contributing to the initial and ongoing commitment to the program. The Committee continues to provide ongoing links and regular communication between employers, the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community, and the school.

Funding and support from government agencies was also critical to the implementation of *Step ahead*, and school staff and Committee members used their networks to build and maintain close relationships with representatives of key external bodies.

Pushing the boundaries

Step ahead had a clear purpose - to increase the educational opportunities for their youth, many of whom had already left school by year 10. This meant building relationships with influential others who were prepared to 'think outside the box' to help Cooktown find the best way to meet its needs:

> So a lot of support was provided by [the funding body] ... they had people who could think outside the square and you know support us and allow us to take the risks and the risks paid off.

At the time, the existing policy of the major funding body precluded funding to year 9 and 10 VET in Schools programs. With the support of the community, the school challenged funding body policy:

> ... [because of] the recognition of the commitment of the people involved at Cooktown ... the lady [from the funding body] ... said well this doesn't really quite fit the guidelines precisely, but it's such a valuable initiative we need to keep it going.

The school also challenged traditional education boundaries such as the 9.00 am to 3.00 pm school day, and by appointing a local business person to the position of *Step ahead* coordinator, the Principal challenged traditional educational practices. Whilst not a trained educator, this person has been Chairperson of the *Step ahead* Management Committee since its inception, and also has close links with the Shire council. The *Step ahead* Coordinator uses her broad networks to facilitate communication between the school and community, and has done much to strengthen the relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities within the region.

Outcomes

The school reports an increase in both attendance and retention rates as a result of the program. Students have gained a sense of identity of their place in and value to the community, and have become positive role models to other young people. In addition, some have gained employment, or pathways to employment through school-based apprenticeships.

The findings also indicate that community capacity has increased, as *Step ahead* brings school and community members together to bring about change in their community:

> ... [*Step ahead]* brought [together] ... a group of people with similar interests and ideas and ambitions, I suppose, and that gave that base then to look at those other (initiatives), say the local work force [partnership] was an off shoot from that and then I suppose just because the support and talk, actions came out of that because you get things ...

Positive local and statewide publicity generated by the success of *Step ahead* has increased the community's self-esteem, sense of identity and pride. In addition, *Step ahead* has helped to bring about a greater community awareness of the need for ongoing education and training, and has been the catalyst for other community initiatives, including a planned community-run skills centre. Those involved in planning the skills centre include the *Step ahead* coordinator and several *Step ahead* Management Committee members.

Discussion

By working closely with its community through the *Step ahead* program, Cooktown State School has contributed to the sustainability of the region in terms of addressing youth issues such as low school retention rates and low self-esteem. These outcomes

of VET in Schools programs are consistent with those reported by Misko (1999), Kilpatrick et al (2000), and Kane (1997, cited in Dumbrell 2000). By providing a mechanism for community-wide interaction and stimulating the formation of new networks within and external to the community, the school also has helped to foster community social capital (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000).

Underpinning these contributions is a school leadership process which facilitates inclusivity, developing the capacity of school and community members, relationship building, and risk-taking. These are all elements of effective leadership associated with school reform (Mulford 1994; Silins and Murray-Harvey 1999) and community sustainability (Falk and Mulford forthcoming).

The decision of the school to involve all stakeholder groups in the planning and development of *Step ahead* demonstrates the importance placed on broad-based involvement in leadership. The Management Committee illustrates how school and community leaders from all sectors have worked together to develop a shared vision and to work collaboratively for the benefit of the community. By distributing leadership, all stakeholders have been given a voice in the planning, development and maintenance of *Step ahead*. This distribution of leadership responsibilities is indicative of the transformational leadership practices within the school (Lambert 1998; Silins and Mulford, cited in Hallinger et al forthcoming). In addition, Committee members utilised their extensive internal and external networks in order to recruit employers to the program and to build support for *Step ahead*. This focus on using and building networks aligns with the enabling leadership model proposed by Falk and Mulford, which is most likely to facilitate the growth of social capital (Falk and Mulford forthcoming).

Our case study provides a number of examples of school leadership fostering the leadership capacity of school and community members. For example, the initiative for *Step ahead* came from two staff members who were encouraged to take an active role in making the vision a reality. The *Step ahead* coordinator has been encouraged to draw on her wide networks within and outside the community to develop the program and ensure its sustainability. This person has also contributed significantly to the development of social capital within the community, because of her willingness to use her broad internal and external linkages and because of her links with the past, through involvement in the planning and implementation of the program from its inception. She is also contributing to development in the future, through involvement in a number of community planning groups including the proposed skills centre planning committee. These findings are consistent with the literature, noting that the dimensions of internality-externality, and historicity-futuricity, are important in helping to build community social capital (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000).

Transformational and distributive leadership within the school fosters organisational learning, which indicates being able to take initiatives and risks (Silins and Mulford cited in Hallinger et al forthcoming). The school's willingness to take risks, as well as strong school and community commitment to change, provided the motivation to push the boundaries in relation to funding guidelines and the length of the school day, for example. It also provided the motivation to appoint a business person, and not a trained educator, to the position of *Step ahead* coordinator. The benefits of such an appointment have more than justified the risk, as the VET coordinator utilises her

skills in relationship building, especially in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, for the benefit of the community.

By fostering broad-based involvement in the leadership process, and by demonstrating a willingness to think outside the box and push boundaries, Cooktown State School has ensured that the particular needs of the community have been met. Visionary school leadership, not unlike the new model of enabling leadership proposed by Falk and Mulford (forthcoming), has played a key role in achieving this outcome.

Conclusion

In attempting to find local solutions to local concerns, communities need to utilise all available internal and external resources, and must have the courage to take risks and push boundaries. This paper supports the argument that the school is integral to the process. It also demonstrates how a school leadership process utilising both transformational and enabling leadership practices, influences the extent of the school's contributions to its community. When rural schools play an integral role in their community's development, the likelihood of community sustainability as instanced by the case described in this paper, is increased.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, the terms 'rural' and 'remote' will be used synonymously.

Acknowledgements

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